

Mandela in Prison 20 Years

JACK FOISIE

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S. Africa's Black Patriarch Still Looks to a Better Day

By JACK FOISIE, *Times Staff Writer*

BRANDFORT, South Africa—Nelson Mandela has been in prison for more than 20 years, and the white-minority government has sought to reduce him to the status of a non-person, suppressing his writings and keeping his picture out of the newspapers. Yet Mandela continues to be the inspirational leader of South Africa's black nationalist movement.

The 65-year-old head of the outlawed African National Congress is serving a life sentence for treason, and because he is the unifying father figure for all the various groups opposed to South Africa's system of legalized racial discrimination, he is not likely to be freed soon—although Prime Minister Piter W. Botha is being pressured by liberal groups at home and abroad to approve a parole. As recently as last month, Botha indicated that no such action is likely in the immediate future.

According to Mandela's wife, Winnie, and others who have recently seen him in prison or corre-

sponded with him, Mandela is unbowed and unbroken, and continues to have an appetite for learning that has made his life in prison bearable.

"There has never been any doubt in his mind that he shall come back to lead the people to a better life," Winnie Mandela said the other day in the tiny living room of her three-room house.

She has been banished by the government to live here in Brandfort, a small farming community in the Orange Free State. It is a province where racial discrimination is deeply entrenched; the

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blacks are oppressed and descendants of Indian immigrants cannot even live here.

Her husband remains widely respected, even by young militants who think that older black leaders are timid, or worse, collaborate with the white government.

When several thousand people of all races met in Cape Town recently to form the anti-government United Democratic Front and it came time to nominate honorary patrons for the group, the first name proposed was that of Nelson Mandela. The delegates rose to their feet and cheered. He was chosen by acclamation.

Since then the government has allowed no mass meetings of the United Democratic Front.

Mandela's status as a hero of the black cause may derive in part from his long imprisonment. But even

After Sharpeville—which led to the outlawing of the African National Congress—Mandela, who had been a moderate, went underground and helped form Umkhonto We Sizwe (Zulu for "Spear of the Nation"), the armed wing of the black nationalist organization. This group has since carried out guerrilla and terrorist activities of increasing intensity.

Mandela was captured in August, 1962, and at his trial he openly took responsibility for the sabotage campaign his movement had undertaken.

In prison, he has become a near-legend among South African blacks and among progressives abroad. Universities in a number of countries, East and West, have conferred honorary degrees on him. Streets and squares in several countries have been named for him.

The scrolls and medals that honor him are being held by friends until the day, as Winnie Mandela said, "when Nelson is free."

According to the three women who have seen or corresponded with Mandela recently—Winnie Mandela, Helen Joseph and Helen Suzman, a liberal member of the South African Parliament—neither fame nor confinement had much effect on him.

He was recently given the privilege of reading uncensored newspapers and has thus been able to keep up with events. But his conversations with his wife are monitored, and during a special visit with Helen Suzman, the prison superintendent was seldom out of earshot, so neither woman was able to ask him how he feels about the most recent developments in racial affairs. There have been two of some consequence:

—Prime Minister Botha's constitutional reform proposals, which are to face a referendum of white voters on Nov. 2. It calls for giving a limited political voice to Asians and Coloreds (those of mixed race), but continues to exclude blacks from any political activity at the national level.

—The African National Congress' escalation of terrorism, as reflected in the bombing in May of an air force building in Pretoria. In earlier attacks, the organization had sought to prevent civilian casualties,

but on this occasion 19 people were killed—some of them blacks who happened to be only passing by when the bomb exploded.

Mandela's wife, who is 48 and, despite her banishment, a black leader in her own right, said after her most recent visit with her husband: "We cannot discuss ideologies, naturally. But on some forbidden subjects he is able to convey his thoughts indirectly, and I understand him."

Helen Joseph, who gets birthday and Christmas cards along with letters from Mandela, said that he writes about their early association, particularly the time when she provided shelter for his wife while he was on the run.

"He mentions places that would have no meaning for the censors, but he knows that I will understand," she said. "He also writes of earlier years, before he took up the liberation struggle."

She read from one of his neat, handwritten letters:

"I find that as I grow older, the keener do I become to see the places where I spent my childhood. Particularly the thatched-roof school where I learned my ABC's. The plains and hills where I shepherded livestock and hunted all kinds of game. And the mighty pools and small streams where I used to swim, unmindful of cholera, the bilharzia worm and you name it."

Suzman, who has served in Parliament for 30 years and is an outspoken opponent of Prime Minister Botha and the discriminatory policy of apartheid, was allowed to see Mandela in July, after reports were published abroad that he was being mistreated.

For reasons the authorities have not fully explained, Mandela and a number of other life-term political prisoners were transferred in April, 1982, from the

infamous fortress prison on Robben Island, near Cape Town, to a new maximum-security prison at Pollsmoor, also near Cape Town.

Suzman had visited Mandela at Robben Island and found that conditions are indeed different at Pollsmoor. But she does not believe that there is any calculated attempt by prison officers to break Mandela's spirit.

"Let me tell you," she said in a recent interview, "it would take a lot to break the spirit of a man like Nelson Mandela."

Robben Island is an open prison, and, according to Suzman, "the island itself is the jail, for you'd risk your life to try to swim away from it."

Mandela, she said, misses the privacy of his single cell at Robben Island. He could study there, but at Pollsmoor he shares a dormitory cell with five other men, four of

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whom are associates from their black-activist days together.

"They are congenial," Suzman said, "but it still doesn't give him the privacy he would like for study."

One of South Africa's first black lawyers, Mandela is studying for a doctorate degree—by mail. He told Suzman that he also misses being able to take part in sports and to work in the garden, things he could do on Robben Island. The exercise yard at Pollsmoor is said to be limited, surrounded by high walls that shut out all but a patch of sky.

When Winnie Mandela visits her husband, she is not allowed to talk with him except through a tube, and the conversation is monitored. There is a glass barrier between them.

"Just think," she said wistfully. "I have not been able to touch my husband—to hold his hand—for all these years."

In 1976, when the people of Soweto rose up, they shouted, 'Mandela, Mandela, Mandela!'

before he went to prison in November, 1963—he was arrested and first confined the year before—he had broad support among the blacks, who make up 70% of South Africa's population but have no national political rights.

Mandela is the son of a chief of the Tembu tribe, and early on, he appeared to surmount the deep-rooted tribal differences that make it difficult to achieve unified black political action in South Africa. He has also bridged the old political split between rural blacks and the generally better-educated urban blacks.

In 1976, when the people of Soweto, the ghetto township near Johannesburg, rose up against the authorities, they shouted, "Mandela, Mandela, Mandela!"

"He is still a galvanizing force," said Helen Joseph, a white liberal who corresponds with Mandela despite her own status as a "listed person." As such, she cannot be quoted in South African publications.

Along with Mandela and more than 100 other people, she was acquitted of treason charges in 1958 after a mass trial that lasted more than two years. It was in a later trial that Mandela was convicted, a case that grew out of a 1960 confrontation between blacks and the police at Sharpeville in which 56 blacks were killed.